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Ajanta Murals as a Reflection of the Contemporary Society

Shruti Lal
Research Scholar, Art History and Art Appreciation, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Art has been regarded as a mirror of society from ancient times. The artist preserves a visual history of the period by depicting what he sees in paintings. The paintings have the potential to serve as an illustrative record of the ordinary culture that existed throughout the Vakataka period. They show the Ajanta painter's personal interpretation of the world. The paper will look into why art is considered a reflection of society. Ajanta Caves are acclaimed for their magnificent Buddhist murals and sculptures. Ajanta's art closely corresponds with two major Deccan empires. They were excavated in Deccan during the Satavahana and Vakataka periods, roughly four hundred years apart. The paper will focus on the murals of the caves of the Vakataka period, i.e., Caves 1, 2, 16, and 17. The Vakataka period was characterized by significant political stability and prosperity in the Deccan region, both of which contributed to the development of artistic expression. The paper will analyze how murals reflect commerce and society. This paper will investigate the wide variety of cultural artifacts that are depicted in the paintings. This paper will examine the activities portrayed in these murals**.**

Keywords: Ajanta, Murals, Society, Culture, Cave.

Introduction

The relationship between art and society is intricate, with art acting as a mirror of societal values and an agent of cultural transformation. Art, in all of its myriad manifestations and movements, acts as a prism through which one can inspect the ideas, beliefs, and ambitions of a society at any given moment in time. The Ajanta caves hold a distinctive position in the history of Indian art. It is renowned for its architecture, sculpture, and paintings, representing the pinnacle of Indian art achieved in the 5th century CE. These caves have earned a reputation for being among the finest in the world due to their unique characteristics and the exceptional artistic capabilities they possess. They form a link with the Satavahanas and the Vakataka dynasty through their murals and sculptures. About a hundred kilometres north of -

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-Aurangabad in Maharashtra, amid the Sahyadri range of Western Ghats, lies the magnificent site of Ajanta. The Ajanta caves are formed in the shape of a horseshoe and are located on the bank of the river Waghora. The beauty of these caves is enhanced by the splendour of the waterfall of seven leaps, known as *Sat-kund* or seven pools (Griffiths, 1983, p. 2). The caves were excavated in two periods – the Satavahanas, which ruled from 225 BCE to 225 CE (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 1), and after a gap of four centuries by the Vakatakas, who ruled Deccan in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Vakataka dynasty, especially during Hari Sena's reign, facilitated the site's subsequent development. His rule marked a golden era of art and culture, leaving an enduring impact on the artistic marvels located within the caves. During this period, there was a shift in the artistic style of the murals, which can be seen in the caves that date to these periods. The caves at Ajanta are unique as they represent the zenith in the development of Buddhist rock-cut in Western India in the fifth century. Many cave walls were once adorned with murals; however, numerous paintings have been obliterated or impaired due to vandalism or natural phenomena. The paintings can only be found in caves 1, 2, 9, 10, 16, and 17. Of these Caves, 9 and 10 are the oldest and belong to the Satavahana period, whereas caves 1, 2, 16, and 17 belong to the Vakataka period. This paper focuses on paintings from the Vakataka period.

The caves were first rediscovered by some British officers of the Madras Army in 1819 and have been at the centre of the scholarly world ever since because of their rich murals and sculptures. Various attempts have been made to copy and preserve its caves' rich heritage. After the caves were rehabilitated, the artistic endeavours that took place there became far more grandiose. During the reign of the Western Vakatakas, the later phase of Ajanta developed. The Vakatakas were matrimonially linked to the Imperial Guptas, who dominated the country's northern areas at the time. During India's fourth and fifth centuries, the Vakataka dynasty was one of the most influential rulers in religious and artistic patronage. The caves were excavated during the reign of Harisena. Despite being a Hindu ruler, he patronised the execution of Buddhist caves.

The social life reflects the wealth brought about by the tremendous dominance of the Vakataka-Guptas. The taste and fashion of people underwent a drastic transformation between the two periods. The articulateness of the society is well reflected in the paintings, which is a testimony to the prosperity of the period. During this historical period, the Deccan region saw a substantial amount of political calm, which, in conjunction with the region's economic growth, fostered the region's cultural activity. A testament to the thriving economy may be seen in the numerous charitable donations made by merchants and their guilds to various places of worship. Being Buddhist in nature, the chief theme of the paintings is the Jataka tales and events from the life of Buddha. Both realism and imagination are used to depict paintings. The artist, who has a fantastic sense of beauty and a lively imagination, can give these stories a touch of realism by integrating behaviours and mannerisms from contemporary life. This demonstrates the artist's remarkable sense of beauty and vivid imagination. The paintings depict the daily routines, beliefs, clothing, jewellery, weapons, and instruments used during that time. This paper will concentrate on the activities of the Vakatakas, discussing the courtly life, trade relations, and recreational activities, along with their attire and architecture, which are also significant in Ajanta paintings.

1. Courtly Life:

The king's palace plays a significant role in the day-to-day functioning of society. The king's palace was not just a residential place for the royal family and its attendants but served various other purposes. In *Simhala Avadana* of Cave 17, the court is depicted as having walls of modest proportions; these walls, which can be referred to as enclosed walls encircling the palace gates, indicate the palace. In addition, the palace houses a sizable chamber or court

that serves as a venue for holding public hearings and hosting dignitaries from nearby countries. A great hall in the illustration suggests that the king had regular gatherings for public debate and the dispensation of justice. A second enormous hall may be seen in the *Sibi Jataka* of Cave 1, where the scene depicts King Sibi presiding over a large assembly (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 34).

Figure 1: *Sibi Jataka*, Cave 1

The majority of the palaces were private quarters for the royal family. Queens, princesses, and other females were each provided with their own private quarters. The Queen's private chamber is represented in the Dying Princess within Cave 17, where she is seated amidst her attendants. *Mahajanaka Jataka* in Cave 1 portrays a private chamber belonging to the king. In this chamber, the king is shown seated with his Queen, surrounded by his attendants. Another significant aspect of the palace is the royal bath, as illustrated in the *Lustration* in Cave 1 (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 26). The King and Queen utilised this for their bathing purposes. In the *Lustration scene*, we see the attendants pouring water on the king while a few more attendants carry pots filled with water for the bath. There were steps made on the royal bath, which gave the impression that it was positioned on a pedestal.

Figure 2: *Lustration Scene*, Cave 1

Much about society may be inferred from how individuals dress and adorn. A dhoti depicted as worn by the king, characterised by its brevity, reaching barely to the knee,

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referred to as an *ardhoruka*. To secure this fabric, the king wears a mekhela adorned with jewels around his waist. The upper garment worn by the king is known as the *uttariya* (Dhavalikar, 1963, pp. 58-60). It is depicted in *Visvantara Jataka* from Cave 17. Researching a king's hairstyle is difficult due to the prevalence of elaborate headdresses; nevertheless, there are a few occasions where the coiffure is visible, allowing us to see the king's full-grown hair. The most common hairdo has the king with long hair arranged in ringlets that cascade over the forehead and strands that extend to the nape of the neck. The hairstyle is secured with a band, usually adorned with gems. Another hairstyle involves sweeping the hair back, securing it in a bun, and adding loose curls to the top of the head. The bun is secured with a net and embellished with floral garlands. The Kings possessed distinct garments for different events, including warfare and hunting. A grand crown on the head represents the king. Among other paintings, it is observable in the *Simhala Avadana* of Cave 17, depicting a king adorned with a crown featuring a gem-set triangular crest at the centre and two smaller, identical crests flanking either side of his head. In the *Hamsa Jataka* of Cave 17, the king is often seen with his ministers, who are depicted wearing long, flowing tunics with full sleeves extending to the knee, round necks, and embroidered patterns. Numerous rulers and ministers are seen donning a tiara.

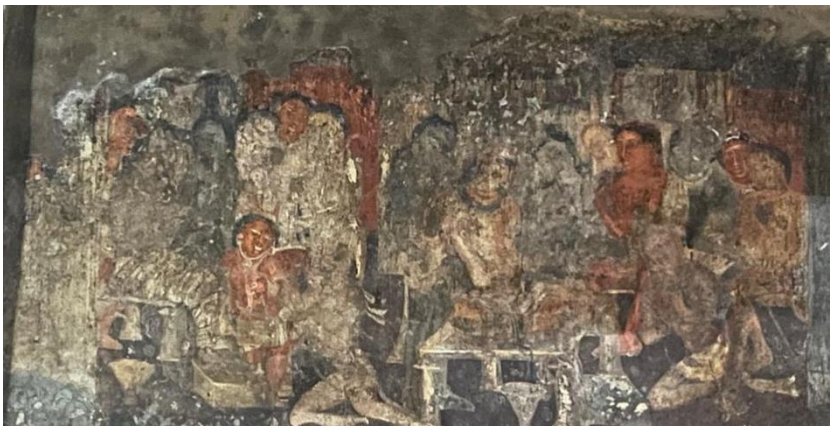

Figure 3: *Visvantara Jataka*, Cave 17

The women in the royal family possess a broader array of wardrobe alternatives compared to the males. Women are observed donning a garment secured around their waist, with its fringes cascading loosely between their legs. Queens are also observed using skirts called *chadantaka*, constructed from delicate transparent cloth. This is seen in the *Toilet Scene* of Cave 17, where the princess has encased the lower garment in a darker linen adorned with stitched rows of pearls and secured with a *mekhala* (Dhavalikar, 1963, pp. 67-69). The princess is shown getting ready with her attendants.

Figure 4: *Toilet Scene*, Cave 17

In the Birth of Buddha in Cave 2, Queen Maya is portrayed wearing an *antariya*, resembling a short garment. The Queen's upper garment is referred to as *uttariya* (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 69). The Queen's mother is depicted wearing it in the *Mahajanaka Jataka* of Cave 1. In *Mother and Child* of Cave 17, Princess Yashodhara is shown wearing an upper garment akin to an apron. Women exhibit a range of hairstyles, the most basic being hair loss, which is not the typical coiffure for queens and princesses yet illustrated in the *Champaya Jataka* of Cave 1. Also, dishevelled hair is within a net embellished with pearls, as illustrated in the *Dying Princess* of Cave 16. The apsaras of Cave 17 exhibit their unbound hair in coils. A prevalent hairstyle is the spiral-twisted hair, as depicted in the *Visvantara Jataka* of Cave 17 and the *Mahajanaka Jataka* of Cave 1. The royal women are portrayed embellishing themselves with an array of gems, such as rings, headpieces, anklets, necklaces, and bangles, among others. The queens don intricate tiaras, while princesses are illustrated in jewelled turbans adorned with pearl embellishments and tassels.

Figure 5: *Mother and Child*, Cave 17
Figure 6: *Dying Princess*, Cave 16

2. Trade and Commerce:

Ajanta was situated near an ancient trade route between the capital city of Paithan (ancient Pratishthana) to the north via Ujjain, extending to the southeastern coast (Ghosh et al., 1996, p. 14). The other north-south road from Kaushambi to the Krishna-Godavari delta passed through Nandivardhana or Pravarapura, the Eastern Vakataka capital. The east-west road that connected the Arabian Sea ports (Shurparaka or Sopara) and Kalyana to the hinterland crossed the kingdoms of Western and Eastern Vakatakas and ended in Sharabhapura and Shripura (Sirpur) in Dakshina Koshala (Chhattisgarh). The two north-south highways intersected with it (Singh, 2012, Chapter 1, "The Vakatakas," para. 5). This constituted a segment of the economic routes linking India to Central and Western Asia. Commercial activity posts were established by merchants travelling from Western Asia and the Mediterranean. An indication of a connection with Persia (Iran) is found in Ajanta. The ceiling of Cave 1 features an image of a Persian man seated on a diwan alongside his consort. The individual illustrated is sitting in a cross-legged position, adorned in a long, full-sleeved pale blue coat including a collar, armband, and sleeves of a lighter hue. He additionally dons a fur-brimmed domical cap. The woman is dressed in an embroidered gown with long sleeves. All of the attendants are dressed in a similar manner. The facial characteristics and

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attire of the entire group seem to be Iranian. This illustrates the relationship the Vakatakas maintained with the Western world. These murals represent the commercial relationship between the Vakatakas and the Iranians, and the prevalence of blue colour in these murals represents that relationship. The sporadic use of lapis lazuli for blue suggests that certain pigments may have originated from the Iranian plateau.

Figure 7: The ceiling of Cave 1

Furthermore, we encounter depictions of merchants and traders. The *Simhala Avadana* in Cave 17, formerly known as the Landing of Vijaya in Ceylon, spans an entire wall that recounts the story of Simhala, a notable son of a prosperous merchant named Sinhaka. Despite his father's admonition, he commenced a maritime expedition with five hundred fellow traders. Simhala's fears materialised as the ship, burdened with precious merchandise, was obliterated, leaving the merchants stuck near the city of ogresses called Tamradvipa (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 156). Similarly, in *Kalyaankarin's expedition* in Cave 1, Kalyanakarin and Papakarin embark on a maritime journey to seek wealth. Kalyanakarin spotted a blue wishing stone on an island during their voyage. On the return voyage, the vessel, laden with invaluable gems, submerged along with its occupants; nevertheless, Kalyanakarin succeeded in salvaging Papakarin and a portion of their wealth (Singh, 2012, Chapter 2, "Kalyakarin," para. 1). The *Purna Vadana* in Cave 2 exemplifies trade links and maritime activities. An illustration depicts a ship transporting cargo, perhaps sandalwood, from an island (Schlingloff, 1988, p. 203). These murals exemplify the travel and trade relations shown on the walls of Ajanta, signifying that commerce with other regions was widespread and actively pursued. Furthermore, marine trade relations were prevalent during the time.

Figure 8: *Kalyakarin's Adventure*, Cave 1

3. Domesticating Animals:

Animals seem to hold considerable significance in the Ajanta murals. Numerous jatakas illustrate that the Bodhisattva has taken on the form of an animal to convey essential wisdom. Thus, it is evident that animals were regarded with great reverence. The majority of the creatures are depicted as integral to the forest and are used to characterise a forest. Nevertheless, several areas provide traces of animal domestication, particularly when they are housed in stables and within residences. The artist has shown a stable containing a horse in the *Sutamsoma Jataka* located in Cave 17. The walls are low, extending to the horses' chests. The pillars along the walls offer structural support for the roof. Inside the walls, we also find saddles secured to the pegs. The horses seem to have received much attention, considering this is a royal stable. Nevertheless, there is an absence of explicit depictions of elephant stables despite the existence of references to horse stables. Some elephants are sheltered within the palace, as illustrated by *Matriposaka Jataka* in Cave 17 (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 41). The elephant is positioned in close proximity to a large trough that has been erected there, and it is stocked with food. Simultaneously, the elephant stands in what appears to be a covered extension of the palace. As a consequence of this, it is evident that animals played a vital role during that time. They have also been used for many different purposes. The prince is portrayed departing from the palace on a horse in the *Mahajanaka Jataka* in Cave 1. They served as means of transportation, especially for the king. However, warfare is the most noteworthy application that we have observed. For the purpose of battle, the troops are depicted mounted on horseback, and the army comprises all four units, including the cavalry. Furthermore, we notice soldiers riding elephants and participating in battle. Due to their substantial influence, it is impossible to downplay the importance of the role of elephants and horses in conflicts.

Figure 9: *Sutasoma Jataka*, Cave 17; Figure 10: *Matriposhaka Jataka*, Cave 17

4. Battles:

Despite being a largely peaceful society, the walls of Ajanta are adorned with murals chronicling battles. The *Simhala Avadana* in Cave 17 illustrates a massive army advancing

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toward the battlefield. The painting represents a diverse array of troops, encompassing infantry, cavalry, and individuals mounted on elephants. It exhibits all of these categories of military forces. The king is depicted in his war-dress. He is represented in a bodice with three-quarter sleeves, beaded adornments, and visible embroidered details on the neckline and lower hem (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 63). In addition to depicting aspects of combat, the paintings at Ajanta also serve as depictions of the many different kinds of armour that were used during the conflict. The *Simhala Avadana* comprises a significant number of examples of quivers, daggers, and knives. The majority of quivers discovered at Ajanta exhibited a shape that is nearly indistinguishable from one another. They possess a cylindrical form with sides that progressively taper inward internally. They range from simple to complex, with some following a linear plot and adding random details. The howdah mounted atop the elephant gives the impression that the quivers are dangling from the sides of the howdah. The *Mriga Jataka*, found in the same cave, features a magnificent depiction of quivers. In the *Mriga Jataka*, the quiver is secured to the back with two straps.

Figure 11: *Simhala Avadana*, Cave 17

5. Recreational activities:

Evidence of recreational activities is also observed at Ajanta. The tranquil environment of the time is portrayed through recreational activities. The walls of Ajanta feature a variety of recreational activities, such as music, dance, depiction of a woman on a swing, and games. It also provides evidence of the activities people enjoy doing in their time off. The king is frequently portrayed hunting with his entourage.

5.1. Game

The *Vidhurapandita Jataka* in Cave 2 depicts two activities. The first is an exciting dice game between the King of Kuru and Purnaka. Pumaka is illustrated on the left, presenting himself before King Dhananjaya in the court of Indraprastha. He presents the king with a magnificent jewel and entices him into a dice game. This is the pivotal moment when the king has cast the dice and loses his cherished minister to Pumaka (Behl, 1998, p. 132). The second activity is the Princess Irandati on a swing, a unique detail in the painting. The swing consists of two wooden posts with a flat roof and latticed sides. The seat is oval in shape. According to Vatsyayana, the swing is a necessity in the house of a rich person and is often referred to in ancient literature. The painting adheres to the tradition of Indian literature, where the swing is perpetually linked to romantic and poetic times (Behl, 1998, p. 130).

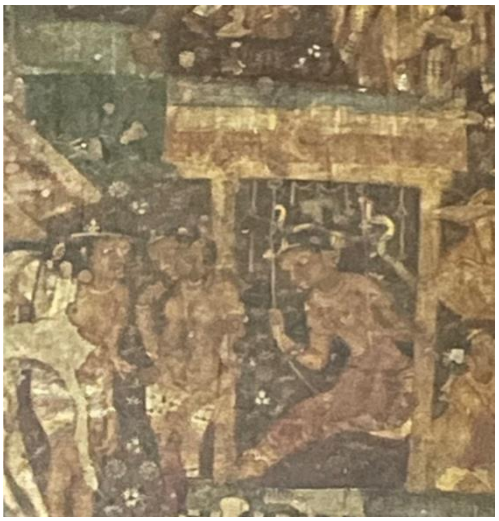

Figure 12: *Vidhurapandita Jataka*, Cave 2
Figure 13: *Vidhurapandita Jataka*, Cave 2

5.2. Music and Dance

The depiction of the Dancing Girl and Musicians in Cave 1 of Ajanta, part of the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, provides insight into the recreational activities popular in earlier times. The Jataka states that the girls are present to prevent King Janaka from leaving the palace and performing in the *sangita-sala* of the Palace. It is a special pavilion dedicated to dance and music (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 28). The specific painting aids in comprehending the range of musical instruments that existed. A pair of flautists, two cymbal players, one person who plays a pair of drums (*dhol*), another person playing a *mridang*, and a one-stringed instrument player are all included in the ensemble (Behl, 1998, p. 95). The central figure is the dancer, elegantly dressed, providing insight into the time's attire. According to the depictions at Ajanta, the women of that time were wholly preoccupied with their adornments. We may get an impression of the rich materials used in constructing the piece from the seemingly endless variety of embellishments and colours. It is expected to see ordinary women, particularly those working in the palace, adorning themselves with exquisite tiaras reminiscent of princesses. We see women wearing earrings, rings, armlets, necklaces, bangles, bracelets, and anklets. Another instance of musical instruments is evident in *Purna Vadana* within Cave 2. Two figures are depicted playing kettledrums, accompanied by three figures with cymbals. (Griffiths, 1983, p. 30).

Figure 14: *Mahajanaka Jataka*, Cave 1

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5.3. Cooking & Feasting

Evidence of a dining hall, or *aharmandapa*, and a drinking hall, or *apanasala*, exists in Ajanta. *Sutasoma Jataka*, Cave 17, contains a beautiful picture of a royal dining area, with the king having his meals (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 35, 38). In the *Vidhura* Pandita Jataka of Cave 2, the king hosts a banquet in tribute to Vidhura Pandita. The *Vessantara* Jataka in Cave 17 illustrates a royal couple in a romantic disposition seated on a pedestal, with the prince grasping a wine cup (Satyawadi, 2014, p. 35). If there is a feast, there must also be a representation of a kitchen for food preparation. The *Sutasoma Jataka* in Cave 17 features a portrayal of a kitchen situated in the dining hall courtyard, which is open on all sides. It is a modest rectangular structure with a gabled roof composed of thatched bamboo covered with grain grass (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 31). It illustrates cooks engaged in preparing meals for King Saudasa.

Figure 15: *Sutasoma Jataka*, Cave 17

5.4. Hunting

At Ajanta, you can often see hunters in action. It was a hobby that was widely practised by royalty. The king and his entourage don specialised hunting clothes and are portrayed wielding bows and arrows to pursue animals in the forest. When hunting, the King in *Syama Jataka* of Cave 17 is wholly clad in trousers and a long-sleeved upper garment. In Cave 17, *Mriga Jataka* illustrates a hunting scene. The king desires to seek the golden gazelle for his spouse. Throughout the various episodes of this Jataka, the king is depicted on foot in the jungle, armed with a bow and arrow. In the second scene, we see the troops making their way to the royal palace with the gazelle. In the *Mriga Jataka* of Cave 17, the king is depicted in a hunting scenario, adorned in a long-sleeved coat with pointed ends, high boots, and trousers (Dhavalikar, 1963, p. 65). Likewise, the *Sutasoma Jataka* in Cave 17 illustrates King Saudasa and his entourage embarking on a hunting expedition with their dogs. The *Mahakapi Jataka* in Caves 16 and 17 depicts an army pursuing a monkey that is resting in the forest. In *Chaddanta Jataka* in Cave 17, there is a depiction of a hunter who, at the behest of the king, is hunting for Chaddanta (a six-tusked Elephant). The king necessitates this tusk for the sake of his ailing wife. Hunter Sonuttara followed the elephant and captured Chaddanta with a poisoned arrow, but he failed to cut off his splendid tusks. Upon realising that his tusks could save a life, Chaddanta detaches them and offers them to the hunter. Upon observing the tusks, the Queen is engulfed by remorse and faints (Behl, 1998, pp. 178-180).

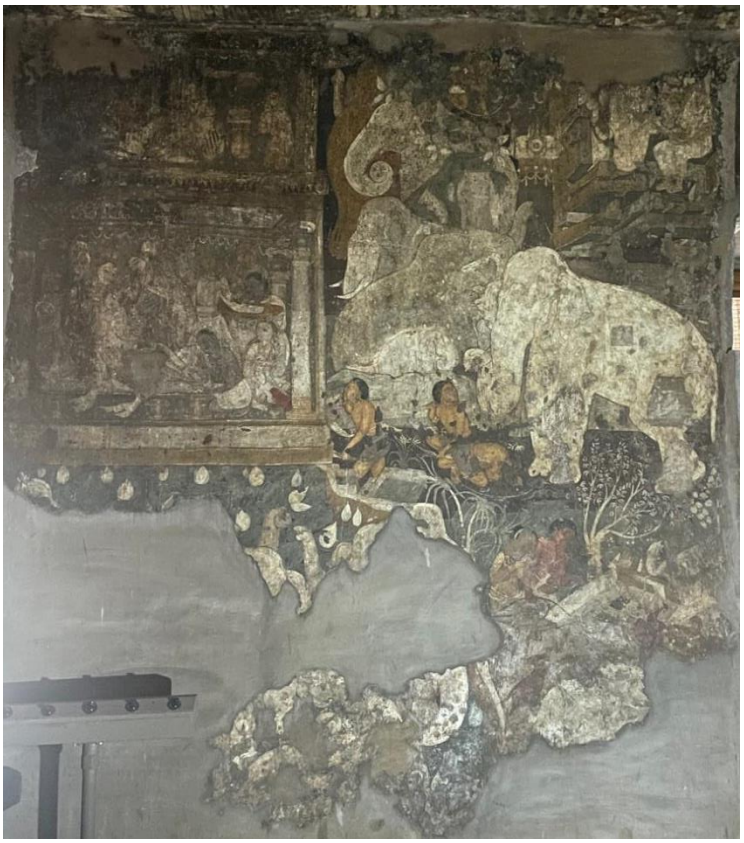

Figure 16: *Chaddanta Jataka*, Cave 17

Conclusion

Murals from the Ajanta vividly depict life during the Vakataka period. Paintings reflect the lives of their time, and the Ajanta murals are examples of such artwork. The inscriptions within the Ajanta caves provide evidence that these caves are a significant source of both material culture and political history of the historical period. This is evidenced by the presence of inscriptions within these caves. The culture and traditions of the Vakataka people are often shown in paintings. The lives of kings, queens, nobility, and common people are all shown in these paintings, giving us insight into their ways of life. Since the majority of the structures and objects are ornamented with patterns, decoration appears to have a significant role in this world. Even the ceilings of Ajanta caves are adorned with designs featuring geometric patterns, floral and creeper motifs, and legendary animals. Each of the motifs is knitted in an elaborate manner. The paintings are of tremendous assistance in developing a clear cognitive picture of life in ancient India due to the material culture that is depicted in them. Ajanta is one of the few monuments that display such a staggering variety of scenes that depict everyday life. The depiction of various architectural aspects, such as a marketplace, provides us with a view of the day-to-day activities that take place in the city. It demonstrates the many different activities the people are engaged in, such as hunting, trading, travelling, etc. In addition to this, it provides a window into the religious lives of the people. The Ajanta paintings reveal extensive information that aids in forming a more precise understanding of the Vakataka society and people. Moreover, it offers a distinct representation of their attire, modes of transport, commercial activities, architectural designs, and leisure activities. The paintings substantially contribute to developing a clear cognitive image of life in ancient India by depicting the material culture of that time. The utilisation of particular visuals achieves this. One of the few monuments considered exceptional is the impressive collection of scenes depicting daily life at Ajanta.

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Bio-note

Shruti Lal is pursuing her Ph.D. in Art History and Art Appreciation from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Her academic journey has been marked by a deep engagement with India's history, culture, and art, particularly Ancient India. Her research interests lie at the intersection of visual culture and historical context, with a particular emphasis on mural paintings and ancient Indian treatises on art. Her interest also extends to the history of South and Southeast Asia. She has presented papers at conferences in India and abroad.

Email Id: shruti.lal94@gmail.com

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